CAPTAIN GEORGE'S
Penny Dreadful
TORONTO, DEC. 12, 1980 NUMBER 616

Oct., 1949 *Coca-Cola brings you*

EDGAR BERGEN with CHARLIE McCARTHY

Every Sunday Evening
Dominion Network and CFRB

483X

Ask for it either way . . . both trade-marks mean the same thing.

Tune in CFRB 9.00 P.M., E.D.T.

COCA-COLA LTD

A WEEKLY REVIEW

DON MILLER

MATINEE FOLLIES: There's this television series entitled Matinee at the Bijou that seemed to bear checking out for all us nostalgia-movie lovers, and honestly you wouldn't believe some of the things that got on the air, but if you've seen it you know what I'm talking about, and if you haven't, don't. It's often best to save your illusions rather than see them distorted, mangled, crunched.

To begin with, the weekly series was hard to find in New York. Public Broadcasting stations were supposed to be playing it, but the local outlet had not placed it on their schedule. It was finally tracked down on a UHF channel out on Long Island which gets everything else second-run. They play it on Saturday evenings at ten o'clock and repeat it the following day at four in the afternoon, which is really asking for punishment. The New York boys obviously knew what they were doing by skipping it.

Matinee at the Bijou is produced by some well-meaning lads via a PBS station in Fresno, California. The show opens with this guy standing in front of an old theater marquee, presumably somewhere in beautiful downtown Fresno, harkening us back to the good old days "when candy was a nickel and soft drinks a dime." Then he invites us inside the house to enjoy a typical Saturday matinee show, which consists of a feature, a serial, and assorted short subjects. To dress up the scene with production values, you see some people in period attire entering the theater, and some pretty usherettes with short skirts. Since this outlay probably eats up the entire budget for the series, there isn't much left to enjoy, unless it's the weekly theme song sung by Rudy Vallee which we won't go into here. What is inflicted upon the viewer is 90 minutes of snippets; nothing, not even the cartoon, is allowed to remain intact. Don't know about you, but around my way if such butchery had been performed on any portion of the bill of fare, not a seat would have been left moored to the floor. What is so ghastly about it is that all this random slicing is so unnecessary; nobody in their right mind could possibly appreciate most of the ancient wheezes they use as shorts, so why not dispense with them? But no, a varied program was deemed important, so everything suffers.

Junion G-Men, a 1940 serial, has been run off, but it's impossible to make much sense of it because two and sometimes three chapters have been combined. Upon occasion it's possible to get away with condensing a Republic serial in this way because the Republic's were often complete episodes in themselves, but the Universal serials like Junior G-Men carried the plot over each week. Anyway, it's nice to hear the old Universal chase music again.

Feature attractions receive the cruelest treatment. Pick a Star was cut in

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

CAPTAIN GEORGE'S PENNY DREADFUL, a weekly review established in 1968, is published by the Vast Whizzbang Organization at Memory Lane, 594 Markham Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

P~D TOPICS

Jack Egan writes a financial column for New York magazine called The Bottom Line, and in the Dec. 8 issue he has some pertinent things to say about the current state of affairs in the movie industry which, he says, "is facing a shake-up as monumental as the one it underwent ten years ago."

He goes on to say: "United Artists' decision to pull Heaven's Gate immediately after its release has ... become a kind of metaphor for what is wrong with the movie business these days." Egan quotes one producer as saying, "It was not just that it was a big turkey; it was the irresponsibility of the management in letting the budget go from $11 million to nearly $40 million and never looking at the material. What has come out of it is that finally the industry has to take responsibility for its own acts. It's the end of the prima donna directors who can do whatever they want."

Egan adds, "One Hollywood executive compared the Heaven's Gate fiasco to Vietnam. 'Every little step by U.A., taken individually, might have had a logical rationale, but taken in its entire context it was insane.'"

The top officers of U.A., Egan continues, were bemused by an "open letter" that Heaven's Gate director Michael Cimino ran in the trade papers, which said unrealistic deadline pressures and the lack of opportunity for a preview had "clouded my perception of the film."

"An experienced filmmaker who needs previews to know what was wrong with the movie shouldn't be allowed to make movies anymore," said one U.A. executive who preferred to remain anonymous. Nevertheless, Egan says, "the company is apparently willing to let Cimino re-edit the movie. At the same time, U.A. executives are looking for another editor to do his own version so they can choose between the two."

Egan goes on to say, "Not all the Hollywood studios are in trouble, but even a relatively successful company like Paramount can engage in gross miscalculations. The advance word on Popeye, the $20-million co-production with Walt Disney studios, is that it may be a bomb. At one screening of the rough cut, children watching it wanted to leave after ten minutes..."

DON MILLER continued

half; a John Wayne Western, West of the Divide, started without credits in the middle of a scene and was made to seem even worse than it was because important story points were omitted. The real achievement was diluting The Lost Jungle, which started out as a 12-chapter serial, down to a half hour. Oddly enough it made sense, which doesn't say much for what Nat Levine was accomplishing at Mascot in 1934.

What is most bothersome about this ill-conceived series is that it gives old cheapies an undeserved bad reputation; its depiction of how it was going to the movies in days of yore is questionable at best; and the idea of pasting together a supposedly prestigious series from odds and ends does everyone a disservice. It may be okay for Fresno, but not elsewhere.

PETE HARRIS

WORLD OF SILENTS: A few issues ago, I wrote about a new softcover book which took an affectionate look at the films of William S. Hart. Now, the perfect companion volume has come along -- Fifty Great American Silent Films 1912-1920 by Anthony Slide and Edward Wagenknecht (Dover, $9.25 in Canada, $6.95 in the U.S.). My only quibble with the book is the inclusion of "Great" in the title. It's a word which has been sadly and badly overworked in recent years and, in the process, has become almost meaningless. It's possible that it was inflicted on them by the publisher, because the authors say in their preface: "We do not claim that these are 'the fifty greatest films' of the period. We do claim that they are broadly representative... every film included has either historical or aesthetic value or both."

A number of the films covered bear titles that are probably familiar even to people who have never seen a complete feature from the era in question -- The Spoilers, The Birth of a Nation, Intolerance, Broken Blossoms, The Mark of Zorro. The pages devoted to them are well worth reading, but it is the lesser-known or forgotten films which I found most interesting. Stella Maris, for example, (the cover picture is an exquisite sepia-toned still from that 1918 release) had been a completely unknown quantity to me, so it was a revelation to read about a film in which Mary Pickford, who is generally remembered as a golden-curled simp, essays two roles -- the title character who is a sheltered rich girl (an example of her usual screen persona), and a misshapen slavey named Unity Blake who resorts to murder and then suicide to right a wrong. It is, Wagenknecht says, "arguably her greatest film."

The authors make a very important point about Mary Pickford in their account of another of her films -- Tess of the Storm Country (1914). "People who have never seen her on the screen seem to have the idea that her pictures were saccharine or goody-goody. One would like to prescribe a showing of Tess of the Storm Country for them. The girl, to be sure, is good as gold, sometimes even heroic in her goodness, but she is also a spitfire, capable of fighting like a wildcat to protect those she loves."

Another facet of pre-1920 films that will come as a revelation to the uninitiated is the broad range of adult subjects tackled by moviemakers -- white slavery, rape, childbirth out of wedlock, murder, suicide, bigotry, religious persecution, sadism, adultery, all were part of the cinematic canvas which those pioneers attacked with broad, often inventive, frequently uninhibited strokes. It is convenient to think of those early efforts as primitive, mawkish and generally detached from reality. But to believe that is to do those film-makers a disservice and even injustice.

The authors of Fifty Great American Silent Films have included an amazing collection of stills. Many of the films they write about may no longer exist, but somehow the still photographs have survived to provide a vivid if frustrating glimpse of moviemaking in the so-called age of innocence.